

Soldiers *Online*



Trinkets and Treasures

**Story and Photos by
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ACROSS America, more and more people are benefiting from other people's "junk."

Whether the buyers are looking for baby clothes or bedroom furniture, sporting goods, silverware or collectibles like dolls, coins, old toys and military memorabilia, thrift and consignment shops provide ideal outlets for serious savings. And the holiday season might be just the right time to find out what they have to offer.

In the past, people viewed resale shops as "dark, dank, disorganized junk stores," said Adele Meyer, executive director of The National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops and the Resale Industry. Women who wore secondhand clothing risked being called a "secondhand rose" or a "rag doll."

"And it wasn't unusual to see a customer hide in the fitting room if a friend or neighbor walked in while they were shopping," Meyer said.

Christmas decorations need not be store-bought and expensive. Many thrift stores carry seasonal items which can be purchased throughout the year. Christmas decorations such as antique ornaments, stockings, candles and sometimes even the tree can be purchased at reduced costs.



Among the treasures found in the collectibles section of many thrift shops are dolls like those in this little girl's collection.

"People were simply ashamed to admit they shopped resale."

"Today, resale is one of the fastest growing segments of the retail industry," she said, "with over 15,000 resale, thrift and consignment shops, collectively, across the country."

Their popularity can be attributed to a number of factors. "Shoppers love to save money, search for unique items and share the 'thrill of the hunt' with friends and family," Meyer said. Savvy shoppers also realize buying resale items "is no different than the long-accepted practice of buying antiques and collectibles, used cars and boats, and coveted first-edition books."

Resale shops, after all, are those that sell "gently used" merchandise, Meyer said. Often, it's merchandise bought outright from individuals.

Thrift shops are run by not-for-profit organizations to raise money for charities. These range from Salvation Army and Goodwill stores to church-sponsored thrift shops. And stores that consign merchandise, that is, pay

owners a percentage of the selling price, are called consignment shops.

Quality and variety of items, cost, even the way merchandise is displayed varies from store to store. As the popularity of resale shops grows, so does the competition for customers, Meyer said. Consequently, more and more shops select merchandise for its style, cleanliness and appropriateness for a particular season.

Many of the stores sell seasonal merchandise. So the Christmas season sees a wide assortment of decorations, from antique Christmas-tree balls and ceramic trees with miniature-colored lights to crystal "icicles" and crocheted "stars" to hang on the tree.

"What's offered covers the gamut of consumer goods, from precious antiques and artwork to the most basic T-shirt and jeans," said Meyer, whose

One-of-a-kind items such as this paper-maché angel await savvy shoppers looking for unique gifts and decorative items to make the holidays more festive.

organization provides educational and professional development for store owners and managers.

NARTS also promotes communication within the industry and public awareness of what resale shops have to offer. Just as retail chains like Hechts and Wal-Mart provide shoppers with items in all price ranges, so do second-hand stores.

One shop in Fayetteville, N.C., called Saks Consigned Design, a play on the pricey 5th Avenue, N.Y., store name, carries only "very good quality clothing and accessories that are in excellent condition," said owner Judy Robinson.

"We do a tremendous amount of





business in cocktail and formal wear," she said, "much of it with women who attend military functions at Fort Bragg."

Name brand dresses that originally sold for \$100 to \$150 sell for \$20 to \$30.

Within the Army, post thrift shops are operated at an estimated 70 percent of all installations, according to a survey of Officers Wives Clubs, which often operate the shops. Inventories include almost anything imaginable, because most of the people who donate their discards, or turn them over on a consignment basis, have traveled extensively, said Jeane Moore.

Moore, who manages what's been called the "Cadillac of thrift shops" at Fort Myer, Va., has volunteered her time at thrift shops across the Army for 30 years, wherever her husband was assigned.

"It's a winner's circle," Moore said of the Army's thrift shops. "Every item we get was at one time loved by somebody. It brightened someone's life. When we get it, someone else has the opportunity to enjoy it."

At the same time, money spent at Army thrift shops goes back into the military community. In 2000, the Fort Myer shop grossed \$328,000, Moore said. Profits are dispersed through a welfare committee and donated to Army Community Services.

"We support the Holiday Food Basket program and make a donation to another service's food donation

program," Moore said. Profits also go to the post's child care center and library. A playground in the NCO housing area on post was also made possible by thrift shop revenues.

"We also give to services such as the World War II Memorial, Military Child Education Coalition, Fisher House Foundation and the Armed Forces Hostess Association," Moore said.

Last year the Fort Myer thrift shop donated \$112,000 to welfare recipients in the area, and to a scholarship fund for the children and spouses of military personnel, Moore said. "And we stand ready to help any soldier or family recommended to us by ACS or the chaplain's office who is undergoing hardship."

Among the people who benefit are families of soldiers who died in the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon.

Fort Myer's main Thrift Shop is located in what was once a horse stable belonging to the 3rd U.S. Infantry, the Old Guard Caisson Platoon. The Thrift

Shop Boutique that sells collectibles and special-occasion clothing is located next door, in the platoon's old orderly room, Moore said.

"As a military thrift shop, we get a lot of things from around the world," Moore said. "The boutique sells beautiful 18- and 24-carat gold jewelry, sterling silver, Hummel figurines, fine crystal and china, and a lot of things from Bavaria and areas in

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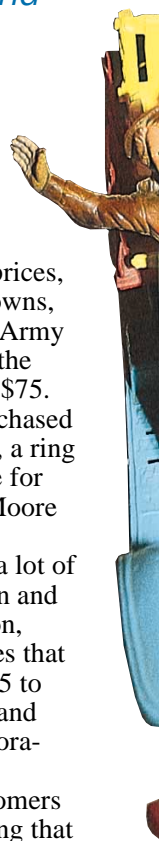
The boutique is a holiday-shopper's paradise of special-occasion clothing at affordable prices, Moore said. It includes bridal gowns, cocktail and party dresses, even Army dress blues. A set of blues from the boutique costs between \$50 and \$75. The mess jacket alone when purchased new costs about \$375. Similarly, a ring that recently sold at the boutique for \$300 was appraised at \$1,500, Moore said.

"During the holiday season, a lot of people who work at the Pentagon and the Navy Barracks in Washington, D.C., shop here for dressy clothes that typically cost anywhere from \$25 to \$45," Moore said. "And offices and schools often purchase their decorations here."

In the main Thrift Shop customers will also find name-brand clothing that



The thrift shop at Fort Myer, Va., consists of a main store and a boutique that specializes in selling crystal, china and jewelry.



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generally costs between \$4 and \$8, furniture, linens and a “wonderful assortment of books,” said Moore, who herself owns an 18th century dining room set she purchased at the shop.

“On the first Saturday of each month we hold a ‘bag’ sale,” Moore said. “We give customers a 13-gallon drawstring bag, and they fill it up with clothing for \$3.” The periodic event cleans out items that have been on the shelves beyond cutoff consignment dates and makes room for new items that come in daily.

The Fort Myer shops are open to the public, Moore said, but only military personnel and their families can bring items in on consignment.

Christine Nyirjesy-Bragale, the national spokeswoman for Goodwill Industries International in Bethesda, Md., said, “Goodwill stores in the United States and Canada



Because military families travel extensively, post thrift shops are often the ideal place to find such choice items as these plates from Germany and the Netherlands.

provide quite an experience for people looking for treasures, too.”

In any of the 2,000 Goodwill stores, including the Internet auction site shopgoodwill.com, shoppers can find everything from vintage Barbie dolls and handmade silk ties to original paintings and fine jewelry.

A Picasso recently sold for \$1,800 through the Goodwill Internet site, Bragale said. And a shopper in Shreveport, La., recently reported that the \$5 sapphire ring she purchased at a Goodwill store near her home was appraised at \$8,000.

In 2000, Goodwill stores in the United States and Canada collectively earned \$941 million, Bragale said. Eighty-four percent of it went into education and career-services training for people with disabilities, those coming off welfare or changing careers due to illness or injury.

Thrift shops operate on the principle that one person's discards — such as this “Beverly Hillbillies” toy — are another person's treasure.

“We served 448,000 people in 2000,” Bragale said. Since the agency was founded in 1902, it has helped some five million people.

Likewise, the Salvation Army - whose motto is “With heart to God and hand to man” - also operates thrift shops that benefit the needy. Throughout the week, truckloads of new treasures come in to the Salvation Army store on Route 1 near Fort Meade, Md.

The stuff includes top-of-the-line, name-brand furniture and clothing, lamps, mirrors, books, colored glass, audio-video equipment and unique bric-a-brac from around the world.

Like-new holiday tablecloths, place mats, candles and holders are among the wide assortment of decorations waiting to be taken home and enjoyed.

What could make more sense this holiday season than to scout out post and area resale, thrift and consignment shops for treasures and, at the same time, share some good fortune with others? □

